

50 years on, all roads must lead to unity

Merdeka will be extra special this year, with an unprecedented year-long calendar of activities to mark a half-century of Independence. ABDUL RAZAK AHMAD sifts through the many planned celebrations and finds the significance of this Aug 31

HOW should we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Merdeka this year?

Fifty Klang Valley school pupils plan to mark the big day with a special breakfast on Aug 31, which will feature tapioca.

They will be part of a Museums Department Merdeka programme. As the department sees it, feeding the children the nutritious though arguably bland tuber is one way of getting them to better appreciate pre-Independence hardships such as the diet during the Japanese occupation, when *ubi kayu* was, for many, the only available staple food item.

A group of seven mountaineers, meanwhile, plans to summit Everest in May. The expedition, led by former deputy minister for entrepreneur development Datuk Khalid Yunus, is also dedicated to Malaysia's 50th Independence.

And it won't just be Malaysians who'll be involved in celebrating Merdeka this year. For the first time leaders from 16 countries, which were among the earliest to establish ties with the country, have been invited to the Merdeka parade.

The Information Ministry, which is co-ordinating many of the Merdeka-related programmes, has unrolled nearly 400 activities of its own so far. They range from television specials celebrating the country's achievements since Independence to kampung-level Merdeka quizzes and *dikir barat* competitions.

An unprecedented year-long calendar of events and activities is, in fact, being laid out. But what is the significance of a half-century of nationhood?

For Dr Jayum Jawan, a professor of politics and government at Universiti Putra Malaysia, what should be celebrated this year are the common values "that helped bring all of us together".

"Tolerance, understanding, and willingness to give and take to reach an agreement are the principles that formed Malaysia. Celebrating Malaysia should mean celebrating these ideals."

But the whole point of celebrating, as historian Professor



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Professor Emeritus
Datuk Khoo Kay Kim

Emeritus Datuk Khoo Kay Kim puts it, lies in honestly answering some deceptively simple questions.

"Where are we heading? Are we better now than 50 years ago?"

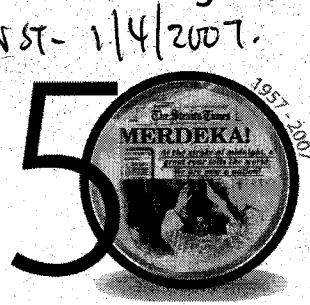
Malaysia has progressed by leaps and bounds in the economic, health, social and education fields. But there's one area which remains neglected.

Many have observed a seemingly growing gap between the races, especially among the younger generation.

Worrying incidents have occurred, especially in the past year: An increasingly heated public debate about Bumiputera equity, problems arising from cases of religious conversion involving Islam and polarisation among students on public university campuses are just some examples.

"The situation was not that bad pre-1957. Yes, we were separate back then, but we could work together."

Citing football as "one easy example to understand", Khoo goes back to the pre-Independence



ethnic-based football clubs that existed in many towns. He explains how clubs would have no difficulties getting together to decide on a multiracial team in tournaments at district and state levels.

"Once a team was formed, the only important thing was winning. Today, university students from different races can't even share rooms in hostels."

Failure to accept this growing gap in some of the areas where inter-ethnic interaction takes place in schools and universities, for instance, and that the gap amounts to a problem, means progress is halted.

"But when you point out these things to some people, they will deny them and insist the situation today is better than before independence," says Khoo.

N.S. Rajendran, an associate professor at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, says that since Merdeka and up to the 1970s, a major emphasis that was taught and practised in schools was the harmony in race relations.

"Nowadays, we're not pushing hard enough," he says.

His research on multiculturalism in the classroom last year found 57.2 per cent of teachers saying they disagreed or were unsure whether their school climate provided students with opportunities to learn about cultures other than their own.

"From my research and own experience as an educator, I think this is something we may have taken for granted over the years. We seem to have put ethnic relations and racial harmony somewhere in the middle, or lower, in our list of priorities."

The state of a nation's ethnic relations isn't easily and objectively measured. Just because differences and problems exist, it doesn't mean unity and inte-

gration is heading south.

Comparing multiracial Malaysia with a family, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia academician professor Datuk Shamsul Amri Baharuddin says that just because the siblings occasionally quarrel, it doesn't mean "the whole house is going to fall apart".

When it comes to blame, the finger often points to a range of culprits, ranging from divisive politicians and parents down to teenagers who refuse to interact and make friends with peers from other races.

Rajendran asks: "But what has been our own contribution to solving the problem and making things better? How many opportunities to interact do we allow our children in the first place?"

As Khoo put it, "It's easy to say that you want to make Malaysia a country with this and that characteristic but words are not deeds."

Shamsul, the lead co-ordinator of the recently introduced ethnic relations module which will be mandatory for public university students, says race relations plays one little appreciated role in the notion of Malaysia as a nation state.

"What do we celebrate during the anniversary of Independence? The ability for self rule, to negotiate, accommodate and share.

"The bottom line is Merdeka is a conscious effort at creating national unity and integration in all spheres. Everything we do must lead back to achieving these two goals."

There is an acknowledgment by the government that more effort is needed to achieve greater unity and integration among the races.

So far, it's already led to a push to make national schools the main choice for parents, the introduction of a National Service module for school leavers and the ethnic relations module in public universities.

Perhaps the most relevant question to ask, as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Merdeka, is what more needs to be done.